Why Do You Seek the Living Among the Dead?
Luke 24:1-11
April 13, 1969

In the middle of the Easter narrative a very important question is asked. Three women went to the tomb in the early hours of the first day of the week. They went there to anoint the body - but also to do what people have always done on their periodic pilgrimages to a cemetery - to reminisce, to mourn a little, to shut themselves off from the reality of the present and linger a while in the pleasant memories of the past. And in the middle of this intimately personal and intensely private experience a rather rude question was posed - "Why do you seek the living among the dead?"

That question, of course, had a direct bearing on the event we celebrated one week ago. Jesus Christ was not there. The question was not rhetorical - it meant nothing other than the words express, "Why are you looking for him here? He is alive, not dead." We celebrated that affirmation: we celebrated the reality of the resurrection and the sanctuary was full. But I think the question itself has broader significance and it seemed to me to be appropriate this week to take a longer look at it.

"Why do you seek the living among the dead?" Or, "Why do we look for meaning and purpose in that which is gone and past?" We learn, of course, from history. We are only what we have become over the years. Only a very foolish man disregards history or experience as the first school master. But isn't it true that for some reason we get stuck in our own past: that we keep dwelling in it, perhaps pretending that present reality doesn't exist?

The older I get, and to many of you that's not very old, the more aware I become of the many, many people who make their lives a living hell because they refuse to admit that the past is gone. The more people I meet the more I am aware that one of the most common maladies of modern man is an almost neurotic refusal to live in the present: - yesterday - or tomorrow - but not today.

Sometimes it appears to very simple. I live in a neighborhood where many of the people are temporary transplants - home is somewhere far away: Lafayette is a brief stop over on the way to somewhere else. And I'm continually appalled at the degree of unhappiness created by this situation. Nothing is right: if only we were somewhere else: some of it is homesickness, of course; but much of it is simply a refusal to come to grips with the present.

Perhaps the problem is age. Most of us spent the first 30 years of our lives wishing we were older. I can vividly remember the agonizing years in school wanting nothing so much as to be out, and mature and earning a living. For several years the reality of life is something in the distant future and whatever is done now is done only in anticipation of that great tomorrow. And then a funny thing happens. Somewhere between 30 and 40 reality takes its definition, no longer from the future, but the past. Anticipation turns into nostalgia. We wish we were young again: if only we could go back and re-live those years of carefree freedom. And life slips by, slowly, while we refuse to live it. One of the more popular samplers that used to decorate the walls of innumerable homes read: "Yesterday is dead, leave it. Tomorrow may never come: don't worry. Today is here; live it." There is an immense amount of wisdom in that little cliche.

For others the problem is a marriage which hasn't been all that the initial hopes held out; or a job that hasn't delivered on the initial promises, or any one of a hundred situations - the reality of which can easily be disguised by living in the past.

Grief, too, takes its toll. There is a very natural process through which every grieving individual must travel. Shock, numbness, copious tears, bitterness, depression, hostility - and finally gradually normality. But many don't make it all the way through, refusing to deal with the reality of today, preferring to spend the rest of their days at station five of the grief process, and ultimately to die of a broken heart.

Another result is a kind of compulsive possessiveness. We've discovered that nothing satisfies our need to own things. The more a man has, the more he thinks he needs, and it is a destructive merry-go-round that stops frequently with a heart attack, or ulcers, or the psychiatrist's office.

Crime, divorce, alcoholism, drug addiction, suicides are the results of affluence, and we are afflicted with them all - throughout our entire culture.

Finally, the decline of religion. One sociological theory has it that comfortable, affluent people don't need religion. Gibbon proved that in his monumental work The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. And recently, Peter Berger, a Christian sociologist, said: "Show me an atheist, and I'll show you a happy childhood." That is to say, men scurry for the protective cover of religion when bombs are falling, or stomachs are empty, or when there is no stability at home. But take away the external environmental threats and men have no need for religion, or a God. Statistics, of course, bear him out: the pollsters continue to warn us that religion is waning as a motivating attitude-forming, force.

Thus affluence: the first definitive characterstic of our times. And it is necessary to understand and feel the meaning of that, in order to comprehend what is happening on the college and university campusses of this nation. Against the opulent back drop of affluence we are witnessing a growing rejection of the whole system. As usual the first expression is on campus - and is symbolized, in the most superficial way, in a rejection of established styles of dress and grooming.

It's a curious phenomenon because the people involved in it are largely the first generation of Americans to be born and reared in total affluence. They are what the system has produced. The average college freshman doesn't know what it means to be involved in a World War, to be hungry, cold or without the means to subsist. Like a giant security blanket American culture has wrapped a whole generation in the swaddling cloths of affluence. And to our consternation and chagrin, a growing number are simply breaking out.

From the campusses we are hearing some very basic questions - questions we, or our parents, didn't have time to ask. For instance, what is the meaning of a system that pays a millionaire senator $150,000 per year not to plant cotton on his plantation? What is the meaning of a system that devises laws to allow 27 millionaires not to pay taxes? What does it mean to drop two million pounds of explosives on a jungle hideout; to put a man on the moon - and to let little children die of malnutrition?

Some are saying that the system is beyond redemption: some of these children of affluence are ready to tear it all down in the spirit of 1776 and start from scratch. Others want to reform and reshape the institutions within the system. But together, like the Prophets in the Old Testament, they persist in posing the kinds of "gut" questions the affluent establishment would rather not confront.

Now, I've led you through all of that, with the calculated risk of turning you off, for two reasons. First, because I wanted to: because I'm impatient with the role our culture squeezes the church into. For many - perhaps for most - the pat response to the questions posed by affluence and the revolt on the campus - is simply "So what: it's not our concern. Our business is religion." I'm weary of that: I'm weary of the Church of Jesus Christ being identified completely with the establishment so that Christianity and Americanism become synonomous. I'm weary of the fact that the kinds of questions to which I have alluded are asked outside the church rather than inside. I'm weary of the fact that we smugly refuse to acknowledge that the Old Testament Prophets ever said a word: that in the name of Almighty God they attacked injustice and poverty and inequality. That is a personal frustration and I hope some of you share it. But more importantly, more positively, I have led you down this particular path because I read the 10th chapter of the Gospel According to John last week, and am committed to the thesis that it contains God's word for his people.

that number participate. That is, Protestantism is maintaining one church for every 75 people - a luxury the church simply cannot afford. And yet every effort to meet the reality honestly is met with furious opposition - a good example of which recently made the local newspaper several weeks before Easter. People just don't want to admit that we live in a new world - a new mentality - that the past is dead and gone.

Of all the institutions in society the church is too often the least open to a new idea - to the fresh air of honest realism. Ministers who would do something new - make some changes - know that the road ahead will be difficult and perhaps impossible. It almost seems as if people want the church to protect them from the unsettling changes going on in the world all about them. And it is my proposition that the church can ill afford to waste any more time pretending that it's still 1910.

The irony of all of this is that faith rightly understood, is a dynamic, living thing. Christian faith is anything but static. And yet the rubrics of the Christian religion can themselves take the place of faith. The forms of religion can become the occasion for seeking the living among the dead.

In the book I cited earlier, Leslie Newbigin points out that the forms of religion can be used as a means of protection from exposure to the Living God who calls men to live out their faith in the changing patterns of the world. Men, that is to say, seek isolation in religion from everything about life that is threatening and unsettling. That is not only tragic, it is the grossest misunderstanding of the whole matter of Christian faith.

A good pattern for the church, and the man of faith, is, I believe, clearly laid out in the account read this morning from the ninth chapter of the Book of Numbers. In that passage the people of Israel are making their way through the wilderness and the greatest temptation is to pick a spot and settle down and begin to live in the past. So the instructions are given: the symbols of God's presence - the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night are moving. And the Tabernacle, thetent of meeting between God and man, has to be moved so that God's people can follow him through the wilderness. The temptation to settle down must be resisted.

That is a wise word for the church and the Christian today. Newbigin puts it this way: "We must be ready for surprises, be constantly aware that the God who is so revealed is also hidden; that a lifetime is not enough to fathom the depths of his being. We must, to use the Biblical imagery, be pilgrims, always ready to move on... To know God, the living God, means to live in the constant expectancy of what is new, yet in the constant certainty that nothing which happens can contradict the reality of what has been revealed." (p.94,97)

In the life of this congregation, and in our personal lives, we need to understand that the basis of our faith - the love of God in Jesus Christ - is secure and neverchanging. But the world is in a state of flux - and God calls us corporately and individually to accept the newness and challenge of each morning rather than retreating into the dead realities of the past.

After all, the risen Jesus Christ didn't stay in the garden. He "went ahead of them into Galilee." To stay there - to remain by the Tomb - seeking the living among the dead - would have been to miss him - and to waste a lot of time.

Life is like that - and so is Christian faith.

Amen.

The Church of Jesus Christ must be concerned with that. It must be the place where the truth is identified and told - the truth that affluence - like poverty - can become a kind of prison: that real life is in the total freedom of knowing oneself as a child of God.

Jesus came for that - to lead us out of the fold into the world - to live and to live abundantly.

Amen.

Living the Abundant Life
April 27, 1969
John 10:1-10
Rev. John M. Buchanan

To the objective observer of the American culture there are two all-pervading motifs which define life in 1969. The first is affluence. The second is a kind of rumbling unrest that occasionally boils over in overt protest or revolt. The congregation of this church is a good illustration of the first motif. Everyone here got out of bed this morning and put a foot down on the floor of a house he is able to own or rent. We will eat, before this day is over, more protein than the majority of the people of the world will be able to find this week. We dressed nicely and rode in automobiles to a well appointed place of worship. Most of us will spend the rest of this day entertaining ourselves. We are a good example of the meaning of the word affluence.

Meanwhile, across the river, the rumbling unrest has expressed itself, and the issue about which the unrest has coalesced is an increase in tuition fee at a university which we, the affluent, support with our taxes.

Increasingly, these two motifs define what life is about in 1969.

Affluence is a very relative idea. The story is told of the University Freshman who came home for a weekend. His father sat down with him after dinner and asked: "Son, how are things going?" To which the young intellectual responded: "relative to what?" Affluence is like that. It's relative, and because it is relative, it's a bit difficult, for those of us who are directly involved in it, to talk meaningfully about it. To see what it means we need to step out of our individual situations and try to get the "overview": to put things in a kind of total perspective.

One thing is certain: it is a new phenomenon. Now, to be sure, America has always produced its wealthy elite. But general affluence, as that word is currently used, began with the Second World War. Ever since that event, the Gross National Product of this nation has been in a steady spiral. Wages and cost of living have responded to each other in the battle for balance so that nobody seems to be getting ahead of the system. But the whole economy continues the climb. Everyone has more, and responsible economists are saying there is no reason why the direction ever has to be reversed.

It's easier, of course, to talk in terms of the visible results of affluence than it is to discuss its theory. We are comfortable. Machines do for us almost all the work our parents did for themselves. One of the standing jokes in our household has to do with the process of washing clothes. That used to be an exhausting, all day job. Monday was washday and nothing else much mattered on that day. Today we carry the clothes to the machine, add the magic ingredients and push the buttons. Simple things define affluence. Ice cream used to be a pay-day treat. Today it is a standard item in every freezer and in the mental economy of children occupies a position just a few grades above asparagus and sweet potatoes. From morning to night - from night to morning - we are ministered to by a fantastic collection of machines that cool the air, cook our food, wash the dishes, transport us to work, entertain us and wake us up again. And the word for it all is comfort.

Along with the comfort and convenience affluence has produced for the average family, an increasing amount of leisure time. We are free not to be concerned about matters that totally occupied our parents: free to pursue pleasure in television, movies, records, books - or simply in adding more gadgets to our households.

With time on our hands we are free to seek new sensations - in vacations, in alcohol - even in drugs.

But affluence has had other results as well. For one thing, people are probably more bored than at any other time and place in history. Whereas before the energies of men were totally absorbed in providing food and shelter, today we are free to fill our time as we see fit. And so - boredom: days and nights filled with the trivia of Beverly Hillbillies and giveaway bonanzas.

Jesus was talking to a group of Pharisees - the spiritual, and political leaders of Israel. They were the establishment, and they were very threatened by what he was doing - and specifically by his implication that they were blind.

They - the Pharisees - had defined the "good life". For them it was a matter of obedience to the law. It was a closed system, rigid and inflexible. The best a man could do was wrapped up in dietary regulations and sacrifical prescriptions. And on this religious base a whole way of life was constructed. Of course, it excluded a lot of people: the sinners who simply didn't care about legalistic morality: the unclean - who by birth or disease were not fit to associate with the holy men: the poor- who were too busy scratching out a living to afford the luxury of institutional religion.

It's strange how institutional religion seems always to perpetuate that pattern. Throughout the history of this nation Christianity has had the unfortunate image of a legalistic, dull affair, far more concerned with what a man refrains from doing or the kinds of people he avoids contacting than the quality of the life he lives. We are saddled with that image - and one gets the distinct impression that the Pharisees would be more than comfortable with the life of the average American congregation.

In any case, it was these men to whom Jesus was talking, and he held up before them an unforgettable image. He portrayed himself as a shepherd - and then quickly - as the door to the sheepfold. The mixed metaphor would have posed no problem because a shepherd slept in the doorway of the fold for obvious reasons. He led them in - and he led them out. He was the way.

The Pharisees, Jesus was saying, were like the thieves who climb over the walls of the fold and rob the sheep of their liberty - their lives. They are the imposters - they are the ones who are guilty of misleading the flock.

He concluded with another comparison. The thief comes only to destroy. "I come that they might have life, and have it abundantly." Not a narrow, regimented life within a closed system of religious rules - but abundant life, full, complete, exhilarating, adventurous living. There is quite a difference.

Jesus, the Shepherd, offered men two things. The door to the fold opens both ways. He offered men the saving, redeeming love of God. That's what the fold is - the security of God's grace. He confirmed for men the idea that "The Lord is my shepherd" - that "even in the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil, for thou art with me." In his life he expressed the truth that God's love surrounds each individual - that nothing in life, not even death, can separate a man from that love. The shepherd knows each one of his sheep by name; when one is lost he goes out to find it - and will lay down his life for it. Jesus the shepherd offers the comfort we call "salvation."

But the shepherd leads the sheep out too: out to grassy meadows and running brooks. He leads out to liberty and fulfillment and life.

One commentator puts it this way: "A fold is good for security, but too much security is worse than too little. . . a fold that is never opened wide becomes a cemetery; as a mind that never ventures into the wide universe that environs us will speedily decay and die." (Major, Manson and Wright, p. 820)

In these turmoiled times, living the abundant life begins when we are able to identify what we are talking about. It begins when we can seriously ask the kinds of questions raised for us by the campus radical. It continues as we learn that our affluence, by itself, means very little; as we become free to use and enjoy the results of affluence for our own welfare - and the abundant life of all.

Discovering Your Calling
John 15:12-17
May 4, 1969
Rev. John M.Buchanan

"You did not choose me: I chose you. I appointed you to go on and bear fruit, fruit that shall last . . . " (NEB)

That verse is a real enigma. The words were spoken by Jesus, to his disciples - twelve common men, fishermen, tradesmen, farmers - who were responsible for implementing what he had started. I would guess that they were as puzzled by the words as we are. How could they accept this kind of respon= sibility? How could they be bearers of enduring fruit when their first obligation was to provide an existence for their wives and children?

The words of Jesus are an enigma on a very practical level because, in fact, we all can't drop what we are doing and become ministers or missionaries. Someone has to "mind the shop". We are part of a very complex civilization - the wheels of which would come to a grinding halt the minute every church member decided to pull out and take on some full-time ecclesiastical task. That's one aspect of the problem - we all can't bear fruit - if by fruit- we mean the carrying out of certain well-defined religious responsibilities. But what if Jesus didn't mean for all men to abandon secular work? What if all jobs rare religious? That might make a difference.

The words of Jesus are an enigma, in the second place, because historically we have seen the tragic results that occurred when men interpreted them in the narrowest, most literalistic fashion.

By the time of the middle ages men had been conditioned to define the word "Vocation" solely in terms of the priesthood. All human enterprise could be ranked on a pyramidic scale, and at the top was the holy vocation of serving God as a priest. From there is was all downhill. The tragic results of this ideology were an irrational elevation of the clergy and a destructive debilitation of the laity. It meant that the clergy became the Church - and because the church so dominated the entire culture in the middle ages - it meant that all work - other than the work of the priesthood was stained with the worldly mark of secularity.

In a sense, we still haven't gotten over that. We still take some comfort in believing that ministers, alone, are called by God to their labors;and if a man doesn't feel in his heart that God wants him to be a minister, it doesn't really matter what he does with his life. We still persist in erroneously defining "calling" - as working for the Church. We still elevate the clergy and debilitate the laity so that no public meeting can get off the ground without a clerical invocation, even though the room may be filled with churchmen; and so that in the church the priesthood of all believers remains a giant myth, because the minister is painfully aware that he's going to have to plead with his people for a crumb of their spare time, and that often if a job is to be done, it's simply easier to do it himself. We perpetuate the heresy of the middle ages in many ways - for instance by expecting a minister to labor for the satisfaction derived - and everybody else in society, for the amount of money earned.

This, perhaps, takes us too far afield; but let it be understood that the words of Jesus about calling men will never really be understood so long as we relegate them to those whom the church calls its ministers. In that context the words remain an enigma, and a rather harmless one at that - because someone else is heeding them in our stead.

In the third place these words are puzzling because we're not very comfortable any more with individual piety. We aren't at all comfortable with the suggestion that God has a concern - a plan - a purpose - for every individual life. We refuse to see a relationship between our faith and our work because we've drifted from that most basic theological understanding that God's love is miraculously intimate and his fatherhood terribly real. And it's a little difficult to understand what there is left, once these under-pinnings are pulled away.

It may seem like a long way from a discussion of daily work, but we really have to begin with some basic theology. And when everything is reduced and distilled we are driven way back to the prototype experience of one man. His

that our individual tasks really mattered at all.

There are like problems with every industry - every job - every chore, no matter how important or humble - and the need is immense and urgent to recover what our culture has lost.

I believe the Church, and its Gospel, has the means of recovery.; I believe it is in a rebirth of the idea of vocation. I believe it is found in the call of God to serve him - using the words of Theodore Gill: "Whoever, wherever we are, whatever we do, we are ministers of God."

But how? - that's a fine cliche with the ring of orthodoxy to it. But how? Every life is different: every job is different - and the observer is going to vary. But I would suggest some broad guidelines.

First, no matter what the task is, it provides the opportunity for basic honesty. That is a sermon topic in and of itself, but did you ever realize how many decisions are made in the workaday world that assume basic dishonesty? I grew up in a town where every other house was curiously the same color as the box cars on the Pennsylvania Railroad. At Ford, I had to open my lunch bucket every day as I left - so that the guard could see whether or not I was stealing a tool. And Congressman Mendel Rivers - just stole $6,000 of our money to send his secretaries on a European vacation. I think we could stand a little basic honesty and I would suggest that we might find the beginnings of a vocation at that point.

Second, no job is without a certain moral responsibility. A professional person daily exercises his right to be morally responsible - or irresponsible. In the areas of law, medicine and education the decisions are clear. But they are there for everyone of us, no matter what we do. The laborer can give the company eight hours work for eight hours pay - or less. The mechanic, upon whom I am totally dependent, can charge me the same amount for a good job - or a poor job. And I won't know the difference. There isa moral imperative inherent in every job and I would suggest our vocation is to exercise it.

Third, and most important of all, every job involves other people, and we have the opportunity - in our work - of affirming their personhood and thus loving them; or treating them as objects and thus denying their humanity. It doesn't matter what we do, others are involved - and we can see them as customers, consumers, employers, employees, competitors, - or as persons. I think God calls us to the vocation of affirming the dignity and common humanity of all - and that the framework of our jobs is perhaps the most critical area for this vocation to be lived.

Finally, God calls everyone of us to become the best, the freest people we can become. He calls us to partnership with him in the continuous process of creation. And the great thing about work, in this context, is that it is all we have. Work is all we can bring. We have been given our talents, our intelligence, our creativity. We have been given the natural resources with which to work. All we really have to offer God in the partnership is our labor - our toil.

In the final analysis, then,k our work becomes our offering: our jobs become the enterprise of responding to our creator. No matter what we do, that is our vocation; that is our calling. And there is none holier.

Amen.

name was Abraham: God called him to fold up his tents and go into another land: he obeyed. That, the Judeo-Christian tradition maintains is "religion in a nut-shell." Out of the darkness God speaks, and man answers. God is the initiator; he orders; men obey. And in the pages of the Old Testament the theme evolves into a symphony of variations. God creates and calls and elects and delivers and establishes, and always it is God taking the initiative while men respond - by praying, by following, by worshipping, by obeying.

That is the basis of our faith. And yet, strangely, our religiosity has had the curious tendency to say just the opposite. God is the great someone in the great somewhere; who listens when men call upon his name; who obeys when men make pious prayer; who rewards when men do good things; who blesses when men order him out of inertia and into action. Nothing could be further from the Christian understanding of the God'man relationship.

At the vortex of our faith is the acknowledgment that God, in total freedom, acts as he wills; that he has chosen to come among men in Jesus Christ - and that he calls men to some kind of response to that act. That is to say - all men have a vocation - a calling - and it is to make response to the self-giving of God. It means - in simpler language - that what we do with our lives is the way we answer our calling: our jobs are not something we do in wpite of our being Christians - but precisely and specifically the way everyone of us is able to do our real life's work of responding to God.

Now, obviously, you can't play in this particular ball park, if your ground rules say, "some work is a fitting response: a minister of the Gospel does 'Holy Work". But I'm just an accountant or a production worker or a housewife." The central affirmation of God's call to all men rules that out totally. The ground rules are fundamentally different. They say - that all work is secular - the pyramidic system of the middle ages is wrong - all work is in the world and totally secular. Or - the other way around (and this is more to the point) - all work is holy: all human enterprise is the framework for living out a vocation: none is better or worse than another. Martin Luther said it well: "Every shoe-maker can be a priest of God, and stick to his own last while he does it."

Thus the theology of "vocation" - or "calling". But we're still a long way from cost accounting and selling drugs and changing diapers. So let's close the gap.

Something within a man longs for the satisfaction of an honest day's work and the feeling of exhaustion at the end of it. With all our time and effort saving devices there is something in men that adamantly refuses to abandon the thrill of physical exertion. For many of us, our fondest memories were of those days when we worked with our hands and our backs and knew at thee end of the day that we had worked.

This accounts for the fact that an affluent man will tend his own garden or his wife will bake the cake she can easily purchase - for me that therapy is the simple act of pushing a lawn mower. Of course, we do a lot of complaining like children complaining about school, because that's what children are supposed to do, but when we are truly honest we would not prefer it the other way. We have within us a deep need to work and produce.

The trouble is, our complex, mechanized, industrial culture increasingly fails to meet this need in the traditional fashion. It is, obviously, a little difficult to garner the needed reward of satisfaction, when one proceeses forms all day, or presses two buttons on a production line. It's a little difficult to talk about vocation within a cuture that focusses on cash as the only incentive for a man's work. That, we are coming to realize, is a form of slavery - and the resultant implications are only beginning to make themselves felt.

One of the most urgent social problems of our age - and one receiving the least amount of attention -- is the meaninglessness and sheer boredom of much of the work upon which our economy depends. For one summer, I worked in a production line at a Ford plant, and I've seen the ototal preoccupation with the clock, the hostility between labor and management - the blatant distrust on both sides. I've seen foremen treat men like prisoners of war - and workers intentionally break a press. And in retrospect I've concluded that at hthe bottom of it all was an oppressive boredom, and complete lack of awareness

The Church of Jesus Christ must be concerned with that. It must be the place where the truth is identified and told - the truth that affluence - like poverty - can become a kind of prison: that real life is in the total freedom of knowing oneself as a child of God.

Jesus came for that - to lead us out of the fold into the world - to live and to live abundantly.

Amen.